

COMMENTS - Heavy weekend rains wiped away whatever recent progress the state has made in disposing of highly acidic waste water at a defunct phosphate plant, renewing fears of a potential disaster and calls for other disposal methods.

12 August 2003 – Herald Tribune

Heavy rain erases progress in dumping waste

By SCOTT CARROLL

scott.carroll@heraldtribune.com

PALMETTO -- Heavy weekend rains wiped away whatever recent progress the state has made in disposing of highly acidic waste water at a defunct phosphate plant, renewing fears of a potential disaster and calls for other disposal methods.

That puts state Department of Environmental Protection officials right back where they were in January, when they sought the federal government's permission to treat the waste water and dump it into the Gulf of Mexico to avoid what DEP officials said could be the worst environmental disaster in the state's history.

The Piney Point site has about 1 billion gallons of toxic water. Officials have said a spill into nearby Bishop Harbor could kill thousands of fish and turn the harbor, and nearby Tampa Bay, into a dead zone of fish and plants that could last for years.

The DEP has disposed of about 33 million gallons of the waste water since it started loading it onto a barge and dumping it into the Gulf three weeks ago. Another 10 million gallons of more highly treated water has been dumped into Bishop Harbor during that time.

Each inch of rain adds 12 million gallons to the brew of toxic water at the Piney Point plant. The plant received a little more than 4 1/2 inches of rain this weekend, adding about 54 million gallons to the gypsum stacks holding water at the site.

The DEP did not return repeated phone calls Monday seeking comment.

Gary Uebelhoer, an engineer hired by the DEP to help oversee the Piney Point dispersal, said the stacks can hold about another foot of rain -- just a few inches more than what fell over two days in June. After that, the water could spill over the stacks.

The water going to the barge is treated with lime, but is still high in ammonia and nitrogen, which can cause algae blooms, such as red tide, which kills fish and other marine animals.

The DEP dumped about 300 million gallons of the lime-treated water into Bishop Harbor beginning in January, but stopped after algae blooms were discovered. The department turned to dumping the water 120 miles out in the Gulf, and hasn't dumped any lime-treated water in Bishop Harbor since July 17.



10765267

Despite everything the DEP has done -- dumping into Bishop Harbor and the Gulf, and trucking to other places -- the plant still has about 70 million more gallons than it did at the beginning of the year.

That's because nature keeps filling the stacks up. More than 38 inches of rain -- 456 million gallons -- has fallen at Piney Point this year, including 14 inches in June alone.

If the heavy rains continue, the state may be forced to resume dumping the less-treated water in the harbor, Uebelhoer said. "That certainly is an option."

Uebelhoer, who has a Tampa office, said that as far as he knows, the rains hadn't done any damage to the gypsum stacks.

"Other than another 50 million gallons that needs to be treated, there have been no problems," he said.

The remnants of this weekend's heavy rains were still apparent at the plant Monday. Roads leading into the plant were under a foot of water in places, and canals surrounding the plant were completely full.

On Buckeye Road, which runs just south of the plant, workers replaced downed power line poles. Uebelhoer said he didn't know if electricity at the plant was lost during the weekend storms, but said the pumps that circulate the water through the cleaning process are hooked up to diesel generators in case the power goes down.

Several heavy duty work trucks, equipped with hydraulic ladders, were at the plant Monday.

Bruce Scott, a consultant hired by the DEP to help with the dispersal of the waste water at Piney Point, declined to answer any questions about the plant. He referred all questions to DEP.

"Nothing of significance has occurred," Scott said. "We get rain out here all the time."

The DEP is trying to get local governments, including Manatee County, to take the water and use it in recycled water systems. Florida Power & Light and Cargill, a phosphate company, are also taking some of the water.

But with heavy rains, those other places have little need, or room, for the Piney Point water. So far this year, they've taken only 25 million gallons.

David White, Southeast regional director of the Ocean Conservancy, said the DEP has boxed itself into a corner by relying almost entirely on dumping the water into the Gulf.

The agency never seriously looked at other alternatives, including incinerating the water

on site or temporarily storing it on ships or barges until a permanent solution could be found.

The DEP's dismissal of those and other alternatives was "superficial and self-serving," White said.

"Their fallback position is always to dump it into the ocean," White said. "They ought to be considering other alternatives, because right now they're going backwards."